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ABSTRACT

The approach taken by three Texas school districts in high poverty and high minority areas to improve standardized achievement scores is explored. The three districts implemented an instructional management program consisting of aligning the curriculum, filling the curriculum gaps, and monitoring student progress. A first step in the curriculum alignment that compared the curriculum and the test to be used was to establish criteria for: (1) compatibility of conceptual knowledge; (2) similarity of evaluation, content, and format; (3) sufficient teacher instruction; and (4) sufficient student practice. When the alignment process was completed for each instructional objective, teachers began filling the gaps for missing criteria. Monitoring student progress followed, using, among other tests, the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) given the year the alignment process was introduced and 9 to 12 months later. The identified schools were able to increase their TAAS scores substantially in a year. Results of this study suggest that curriculum alignment can be a good way to bring together all the resources a district can offer. (Contains seven tables and six references.) (SLD)

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Increasing Standardized Achievement Scores In a High Risk School District

School districts high in minority populations and in students qualifying as economically disadvantaged, combined with long-running low achievement, are being targeted as high-risk districts. Millions of dollars are spent annually to create districts that are more effective in delivering course work and that can produce positive academic achievement as compared to higher achieving school districts and schools. To suggest how to turn these schools and districts around, Levine and Havighurst (1984) identify seven characteristics of effective schools in the Connecticut School Effectiveness Project:

- A safe environment conducive to learning
- Clear school goals
- Instructional leadership from the principal
- A climate of high expectations
- A high percentage of time on task
- Frequent evaluation of student performance
- Community support.

Borman and Spring (1984) identify two additional assumptions critical to effective schools: 1) virtually all students, regardless of family background, can acquire basic skills; 2) inappropriate school expectations and practices are the major cause of low achievement by low-income and minority students. Others suggest moving away from standardized tests and toward alternative performance tests and portfolio assessments. Site based management, many others say, will do the trick.

Spring (1994) states that a major cause of the unequal distribution of educational opportunities between social classes and racial groups is unequal school expenditures, which opens up an even greater argument. If we had more money, many politicians, administrators, and teachers would say, we could solve the problems our districts face. As long as additional funds are not provided, we will continue to wallow aimlessly in low performing, minority districts.

The problem has become so intense that groups like the seven-member Texas Justice Foundation (San Antonio), are forming to improve the education of minority children (*San Antonio Express*, 1996). In fact, the United States Department of Education will investigate complaints by the Texas NAACP that the exit-level TAAS test is discriminatory.

Is this really the case? Does it really take more money to raise achievement levels in school districts? Where does this leave administrators and teachers? Which characteristic should be addressed first? Do student advocacy groups have a legitimate argument?

A SOLUTION

Ferguson (1995) states that "many ... community representatives believe that organizational changes, staffing changes, and/or installation of new computer hardware and software will lead to improved test scores." That is not necessarily the case, according to his research. Improved scores are less dependent on these in-school related variables than those related to changes that tighten the instructional focus. In short, he suggests that well-meaning administrators and staffs spend so much time and monies on addressing those effective school characteristics that they seldom are able to focus on what he considers the main problem in schools today: the inability of administrators, teachers, students, and parents to focus on curriculum issues.

Fenwick English (1992) defines curriculum as "any document or plan that exists in a school or school system that defines the work of teachers, at least to the extent of identifying the content to be taught ... and the methods to be used in the process." The curriculum must be designed by school systems and involve the purchase of texts and/or writing curriculum guides. Once designed, he continues, curriculum must be delivered, a process of "implementing, supervising, monitoring,

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and using feedback to improve the curriculum once it has been created and put it into place in schools" (p. 3).

This process leads to the concept of curriculum alignment—the match or fit between the curriculum (in whatever form it has) and the test or tests used to assess learners (p. 18). English calls this design alignment because it is usually built into the curriculum as it is being developed. "If raising test scores are a concern, the school system must address tightening the curriculum—actions that bring the written, taught, and tested curricula into alignment with one another" (p. 19). Tightening the curriculum, then, means that the overlap between the three curricula must be increased.

THE APPROACH

To improve low academic test scores, the three districts implemented an instructional management program consisting of: aligning the curriculum; filling the curriculum gaps; and monitoring student progress.

Step 1: Establish Criteria

During the curriculum alignment phase that compared the curriculum and test to be used to assess learners, four criteria were established: 1) the compatibility of conceptual knowledge; 2) the similarity of evaluation, content, and format; 3) sufficient teacher instruction; and 4) sufficient student practice. If a textbook objective and the test met all four criteria, the objective or outcome would be classified at an Absolute Level—a strong indicator that the materials and approaches are sufficient for students to perform well on that objective. Objectives or outcomes meeting three of the four criteria were classified as High Partial. Teachers would have to supplement missing criteria with appropriate materials. Objectives that met one or two criteria were identified as Low Partial objectives, again requiring teachers to supplement the missing criteria. If none of the criteria areas were present, objectives were classified as Fallout objectives, requiring teachers to supplement all four criteria for ensuring students would learn the material. Table 1 displays the criteria levels for the alignment of the TAAS Reading Instructional Targets in grades 6, 7, and 8.

TABLE 1
Alignment Results
Reading, 1993 Edition, For Grades 6-8
Correlated to TAAS Reading Instructional Targets

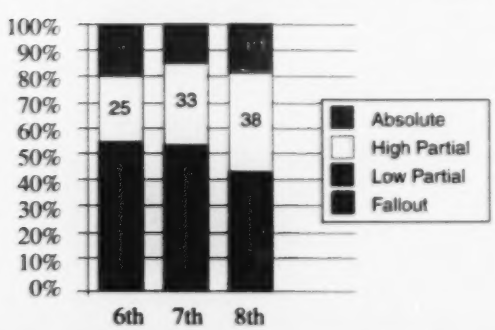


Table 1 shows that only 20 percent of the 6th grade TAAS instructional targets are Absolutely aligned with the reading text with 55 percent of the targets meeting Low Partial criteria. In short, 55 percent of the TAAS instructional targets are not covered adequately in this text for student mastery. An additional 25 percent of the TAAS instructional targets require additional materials to ensure student mastery; 80 percent of the TAAS instructional objectives are not covered adequately by the text.

TABLE 2
Alignment Results
Mathematics, 1991 Edition, Grade 3
TAAS Alignment

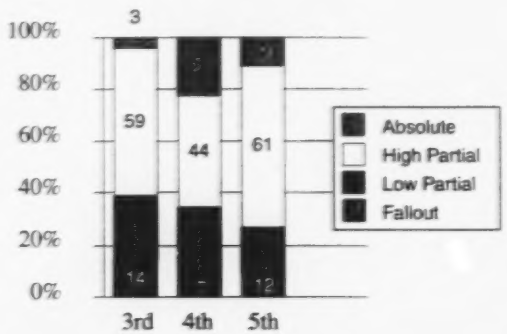


Table 2 indicates that 12 percent of the 5th grade TAAS instructional targets are not covered by this particular text under the criteria set forth in this program (Fallout objectives). An additional 18 percent of the instructional targets meet only the Low Partial criteria. Approximately 91 percent of the TAAS instructional targets are not adequately covered by this textbook in grade 5. Similar conclusions can be drawn at the 3rd and 4th grade levels.

Step 2: Filling the Curriculum Gaps

Having completed the alignment process for each instructional objective, the teachers begin filling the gaps for the missing criteria by purchasing supplementary materials, constructing new materials, developing/purchasing additional testing materials, or increasing instructional time. Once the gaps are filled, teachers can be assured that the instructional materials will be sufficient for students to master the TAAS targets, eliminating or reducing the frustration felt by many educators following traditional approaches to raising student achievement.

Step 3: Monitoring Student Progress

Once the curriculum has been aligned and the gaps filled, instruction begins with steady monitoring of student mastery of the objectives. If students do not show adequate progress, teachers must present the material using different approaches followed again with activities that demonstrate student mastery.

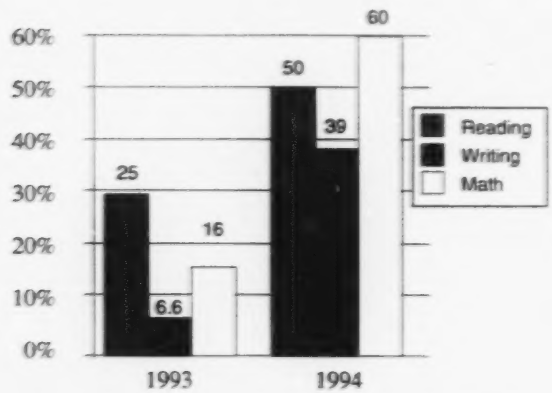
4

A year-long training program for administrators and teachers was implemented in these districts. The focus of the training was the alignment process, filling in the gaps, and monitoring student progress.

RESULTS

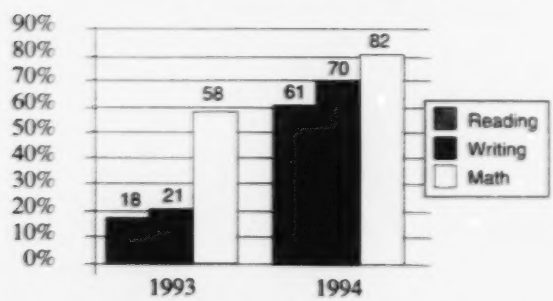
TAAS tests, developed by the Texas Education Agency, were given the year the alignment process was introduced in each school district and followed up 9–12 months later by another battery of TAAS tests at the same grade levels. Results for the three participating districts appear in the following tables.

TABLE 3
Texas District #1
3rd Grade Reading, Writing, Mathematics Comparison
Pre-TAAS Testing



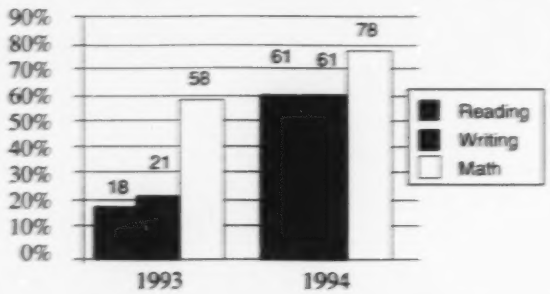
The 1993 reading scores rose from an average of 25 percent to 50 percent, writing scores rose from 6.6 percent to 39 percent, and mathematics scores rose from 16 percent to 60 percent. These dramatic increases were achieved after only one year using the curriculum alignment approach.

TABLE 4
Texas District #2; 4th Grade
1993-94 Reading, Mathematics, Writing: School A



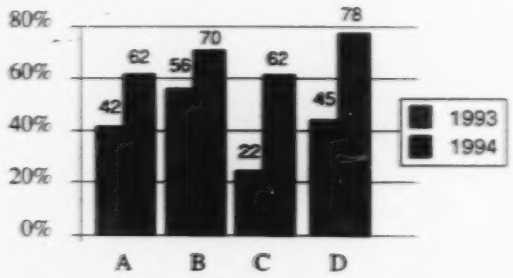
School A also increased their TAAS scores dramatically from 1993 to 1994. Reading scores rose by approximately 41 percent, math scores rose approximately 40 percent, and writing scores rose approximately 27 percent.

TABLE 5
Texas District #2, 4th Grade
1993–94 Reading, Mathematics, Writing: School B



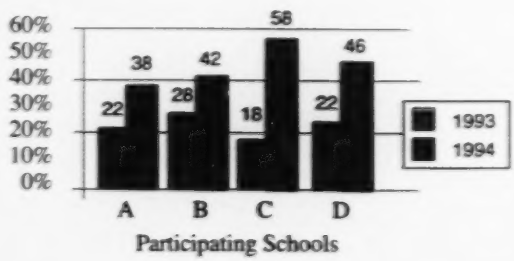
Reading scores in school B rose from 18 percent to over 60 percent during the first year. Mathematics scores went from 21 percent to 61 percent, and writing scores rose from 58 percent to 78 percent.

TABLE 6
Texas District #3; Grade 4 Reading Results, 1993–1994



Achievement scores rose in the four schools identified in Table 6 at the fourth grade level. The most dramatic score increase was in school C where reading scores rose from 22 percent to 62 percent, a 40 percent increase in one year. School D had an average increase of from 45 percent to 78 percent.

TABLE 7
Texas District #3, Grade 8 Reading Results, 1993–1994



In this district all four participating schools increased their TAAS reading scores with school C raising their 8th grade scores from 18 percent to 58 percent, a 40 percent increase.

Increases were achieved in the remaining schools from a low of 16 percent to 24 percent.

DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

An analysis of the sampled textbooks and the TAAS resulted in the identification of objectives or outcomes not covered appropriately by the textbooks. Items classified as Fallout, Low Partial, and High Partial would then become the targeted instructional objectives for the school year. The range of objectives or outcomes identified as requiring additional materials or supplementary work was a low of 75 percent to a high of 91 percent. In short, 75 percent to 91 percent of the objectives in the sampled textbooks were not adequately covered to make a difference on the TAAS examinations.

Two of the three participating school districts had Hispanic populations from 92–98 percent with economically disadvantaged students from 78 percent to 83 percent. The third district had a 42 percent Hispanic population with 50 percent of the students classified as economically disadvantaged. After one year of using the curriculum alignment process as described in this article, every participating school was able to substantially increase its achievement scores.

CONCLUSIONS

The identified schools were able to substantially increase their TAAS scores in a one-year period although they were in high minority and high economically disadvantaged school districts. Much of the available research would predict that this type of growth is not possible in such districts until a myriad of parental, societal, and student problems were addressed and corrected. Then and only then would teachers and administrators stand a fighting chance for making a significant difference in their student achievement scores. The results obtained using the curriculum alignment process described in this research resulted in definite increases in student achievement.

If the goal of our school system is to address student learning, the results of this study would question the necessity of addressing the organization of a school district or school, jumping on the proverbial bandwagon of many school movements, or attempting to correct societal problems through the schools. What is needed is a focused curriculum alignment approach, such as used in this study, that brings together all the resources a school district has to offer.

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